

Flock Audio PATCH Digitally-Controlled Analog Routing Patchbay

By Dajaun Martineau

Studio engineers love gear. I have met some studio owners that think about gear even more than they think about music. Throughout the lifetime of a studio, the gear collection will grow and change, expand and refine. There's always something new to purchase and the studio is an ever-changing entity that follows the trends and technology of the day. The one part of a studio that has always held true was the tool used to connect it all — the patchbay.

A relatively simple concept, a patchbay is just a way to connect everything in the studio in one place. All inputs and outputs of every device in a studio connected in one place so that the engineer can route audio anywhere at any time. Patchbays, originally taken from telephone switchboard operator technology, have remained relatively unchanged. The patchbay itself is constructed as a wall of female TRS connectors or bantam connectors; that is, until now. In an age where telephone and internet communications have gone completely digital and even many mix engineers have chosen entirely-digital workflows, it is hard to imagine using old telephone routing technology in a studio. The founder of Kelowna, BC-based Flock Audio, Darren Nakonechny, thought there had to be a better way.

What if you could just drag and drop analog hardware like you do plug-ins? What if you could save complex patches and recall them instantly and as easily as opening up a session in your DAW? These are questions that Darren and Flock Audio answered “yes” to by creating the Patch App software and their line of digitally-controlled analog patchbays. “Hardware at a click” they call it. A new series of devices to help bridge the gap between analog and digital and bring analog tools back into the digital mixer’s arsenal.

I had the opportunity to try the PATCH, Flock Audio’s flagship patchbay (the larger PATCH XT is now out, as well as the smaller PATCH LT), in my studio for a month and I found it a great complement to my vintage gear collection. It provided an excellent way to seamlessly integrate my vintage gear with my modern digital workflow.

The PATCH unit connects simply with standardized DB25 connectors on the back so you can jumper straight into your converters or break out to any type of connection. The unit itself is incredibly compact, only taking up one rack space, leaving space in your rack for more gear! Once set up and the software installed, it is very intuitive to use and looks very similar to the insert section of most major DAWs. You can label the inputs and outputs and even link stereo units making each piece of outboard gear in your studio a virtual object that you can just drop anywhere in your chain. The software even lets you “mult” your signal with no loss in quality (a mult is when



you take one source and split it to multiple destinations). After you’re done with your session for the day, the software lets you save your routing and you’re able to recall it instantly the next time you need it.

Curious about the sonic qualities, I did run a full spectrum of tests on the patchbay to see if the unit was coloring or changing the sound in any way and I couldn’t find any change in the spectrum whatsoever. Running a signal through the PATCH appears to be sonically identical to directly connecting the output of your converters to the input.

In future updates to their ecosystem, Flock is looking to streamline the studio recall process even further. An upcoming premium version of PATCH App will include iOS integration for iPhone and iPad and allow engineers to take pictures of the settings on the equipment and store them in the app inside the routing files, making the PATCH app an all-in-one solution for analog recalls and routing.

Flock audio, a Canadian company, has seen a wide range of success with younger producers looking to experiment with vintage gear as well as convincing the old guard to give up their old physical patchbay. I was also pleasantly surprised to learn that there are many FOH engineers also utilizing their patchbays for use in live scenarios where they want to start reintroducing analog gear into the chain. In an age where media has been almost entirely digitized, it is refreshing to see a new technology working to unite the future of production with the textures and sonic qualities of the past.

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